Transnational Cyberfeminist Explorations of the Body, Surveillance, and Female Agency in the Selected Works of Marge Piercy and Manjula Padmanabhan

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Introduction and Background

The proliferation of digital technology is playing a major role in redefining the formations of gender, power, and identity in modern societies. The digital sphere has also become a focus of feminist theory, as technology is not a neutral medium, but one that is highly entrenched in patriarchal, capitalist, and ideological systems. Cyberfeminism is a critical approach that questions the interdependence of gender and technology and reveals the nature of digital space as both a source of feminist opposition and a site of patriarchal control. The initial wave of cyberfeminism imagined cyberspace as a place of liberation where fixed gender identity is destabilised; nevertheless, recent academic work confirms that digital space has only increased surveillance, control, and regulation of the female body and voice. Cyberfeminism did not subscribe to the simplistic views of technology as either totally oppressive or totally liberatory. Rather, it has focused on ambivalence means technology can be used as a mean of surveillance, commodification, and control, and also provide new possibilities of feminist expression, affiliation, and subversion (Daniels 28).

Cyberfeminism is not a term of a single theorist or a movement as such but an emergent field of feminist intervention in art, philosophy, and cultural studies. A meeting of thirty theorists in Kassel, Germany, famously refused to create a single definition of cyberfeminism. They published the "100 Anti-Theses" and defined the movement through negation. Thus, cyberfeminism remained a fluid, open-source and constantly evolving concept. The evolution of cyberfeminism marks a transformative shift in feminist theory.

The theoretical bedrock of cyberfeminism was laid before the term itself coined. Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), for the first time, indirectly talked about how women's liberation is tied to technological mastery over biological reproduction. "The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either"(11).

The most significant contribution is of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Haraway famously used the metaphor of the cyborg- a "hybrid of machine and organism"- to deconstruct the rigid binaries such as male/female, human/machine and nature/culture. "A cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (66). The destabilisation of the body-machine divide is one of the core principles of the cyberfeminism. The concept of cyborg that Donna Haraway introduced is a reconfiguration of subjectivity as a hybrid of organism and machine that challenges the essentialist idea of gender and identity (67). Haraway argued that technology offered a path toward a post-gender world, famously stating she would "rather be a cyborg than a goddess"(107). According to Haraway, if we are all cyborgs, then identity becomes fluid and constructed rather than fixed and biological.

The Australian feminist art group VNS Matrix was instrumental in making cyberfeminism mainstream with their "A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (1991). They employed irony, parody and provocation in their work to reveal the masculinism behind the cyber culture. Their work was less about academic theory but more about the visceral reclamation of digital space. They famously declared "The clitoris is a direct line to the matrix" framing the computer as an extension of the female body and a tool for subverting male-dominated high-tech culture.

Sadie Plant's *Zeros and Ones* (1997) offered a more theoretical approach. Plant linked the development of computing- specifically Ada Lovelace's work on the Analytical engine to the ancient feminine craft of weaving (12). She believed that the digital age would lead to the erosion of masculine hierarchies. Plant defined cyberfeminism as the recognition that the computer age is an inherently feminine era "Cyberfeminism is an insurrection at the interface... a post-human movement toward an integration of women and machines" (14).

The current era of cyberfeminism, often termed as Xenofeminism abandons the natural altogether, leaning into the artificial one. *Xenofeminst Manifesto* (2015) by Laboria Cuboniks called for gender abolitionism through technology. In 2019, Rosalind Gill argued that digital surveillance is a feminist issue as technologies of tracking and monitoring are disproportionately used to control female reproduction and domestic life (150). Women are controlled by state surveillance in terms of their bodies by institutional structures that control reproduction, sexuality, and social behaviour which is frequently justified by ideologies of security, morality or welfare.

Legacy Russell in her "Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto" (2020) defined the "glitch" as an act of resistance. The glitch becomes a site of agency for the marginalized sections. "A glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function. Within glitch feminism, we embrace this failure as a site of potential" (12). From the cyborg to the glitch, cyberfeminist literature demonstrates a constant negotiation with the machine. As Nilima Chaudhary notes in recent scholarship, the field continues to evolve by subverting the technological inscription of gender, ensuring that agency is reclaimed in the very spaces designed for monitoring (15).

Early cyberfeminists, like Sadie Plant, Donna Haraway, and Marge Piercy, were techno-optimists. They viewed internet as a site for identity play. Later at the turn of 21st

century, the movement began to evolve and fracture. The utopian dream of a genderless space, through internet, collided with reality. The female body now has changed into a data point from just a physical entity. This process of datafication translated the visceral experiences of the body. When the body is fragmented into data, it becomes a commodity. The cyberfeminist exploration of the body examines how medical apps and reproductive trackers provide ways that often reinforce traditional norms to new forms of biopolitical control.

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1970) is a primary example of Techno-Utopianism. In this work, Piercy envisions a world where brooders or artificial wombs have replaced biological reproduction, thereby liberating women from the physical and social burdens of childbearing. By de-linking gender from biology, Piercy explores how technology can facilitate a more equitable distribution of labour and identity. In her novel *He, She and It* (1991) , Piercy shifts her focus toward cybernetic identity and artificial intelligence. Set in a corporate-dominated future, the novel centers on the creation of Yod, a highly advanced cyborg. Through the relationship between the protagonist Shira and the cyborg Yod, Piercy interrogates the boundaries of the human and the machine, illustrating how Western cyberfeminism initially viewed the cyborg as a symbol of liberation and a tool for subverting patriarchal norms.

The works of Manjula Padmanabhan reflect Techno-Critical views. Her award winning play, *Harvest* (1997), offers a stark, dystopian counter-narrative by depicting a world where human organs have become a commodity to be bought and sold. Padmanabhan uses the contact module to show how technology facilitates the exploitation of impoverished bodies. Her novel *Escape* (2008) further intensifies this Techno-Critical lens by exploring a world where extreme surveillance has led to absolute gender control. In a landscape where

women have been systematically eliminated from society, the protagonist, Meiji, is the last surviving girl, kept hidden and protected by her uncles. In *Escape*, Padmanabhan shows how technology emerges as the ultimate weapon of patriarchy.

These four selected texts, when combined, present a chronological and ideological shift in cyberfeminist thought. Piercy's works provide a vision of how technology could be—a liberating force that transcends biology whereas works of Padmanabhan act as a reality check, showing how these same technologies are often used to commodify and control the bodies.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally changed the landscape of human existence, particularly regarding the conceptualization of the female body and gender identity. While the late twentieth century talked about Techno-Utopian ideas, the twenty first century has brought forth techno-critical reality. The central problem addressed in this research is the existing ideological and geopolitical divide between these two perspectives. On one hand the speculative fictions of Marge Piercy view technology as a liberating force capable of dismantling patriarchal structures through cyborgian transformation and reproductive autonomy. On the other hand, contemporary Indian narratives, specifically those of Manjula Padmanabhan, represent technology as a tool for exploitation, where the female body is subjected to extreme surveillance and biological commodification. The study, therefore, proposes a transnational and transtemporal techno-critique.

The problem is further complicated by the evolution of means of surveillance that are mainly used to monitor the female Body. Traditionally, surveillance was viewed as an

external force. But, the works of Marge Piercy and Manjula Padmanabhan show how surveillance became an invasive and internal force in the modern digital world. This creates a state of techno-patriarchy where the female subject is monitored not just for her actions, but for her biological viability and reproductive potential. As surveillance systems become more sophisticated and automated, the traditional modes of resistance—protest, speech, and legal recourse—are becoming ineffective. The core problem is finding a way to reclaim autonomy when the system is integrated into one's very biology. In conclusion, the problem this research identifies is three-fold: the geopolitical disparity in cyberfeminist discourse, the shifting mechanics of surveillance from social to biological, and the crisis of defining female agency in this tech-oriented world.

Review of Related Literature

Cyberfeminism began as a radical intersection of feminist theory and technology. Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) became the foundational text for this movement in which she argued how the cyborg could allow women to transcend the traditional binary constraints. Haraway's utopian views suggested that technology provides a liberatory space where the body is no longer a fixed biological identity but a fluid, digital construct. This Techno-Utopianism was further expanded by scholars like Sadie Plant, who, in *Zeros and Ones* (1997), linked the history of computing to the history of weaving and feminine labour, suggesting that the digital realm is inherently feminine and subversive.

However, a Techno-Critical shift emerged in the early 21st century. Scholars like Rosi Braidotti, in her *The Posthuman* (2013), began to question who actually benefits from this digital fluidity. Braidotti emphasizes that while technology can liberate, it also creates new forms of bio-power, where the body is monitored and managed through technological means.

This research situates itself within this transition, moving from Haraway's dream of cyborg liberation to a more grounded and critical analysis of technology in the 21st century.

Marge Piercy, is recognized as a pioneer who wrote speculative fictions in late 20th century and translated these theoretical frameworks into narrative form. Early criticism of Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* viewed the novel primarily through the lens of social reform. However, with the advent of cyberfeminism, the focus shifted to the technological control of the Body. Scholarly articles now highlight the brain chip experiment as a precursor to modern digital surveillance. Tom Moylan in *Demand the Impossible* (1986), noticed that Connie's struggle represents the resistance of the marginalized subject against a "technocracy that seeks to map and colonize the human mind" (142). A central point of discussion is the "Brooder" (artificial womb). Moylan argues that Piercy uses the concept of the artificial womb as a political statement to dismantle the motherhood mandate. By communalizing reproduction through technology, Piercy offers a Utopian vision of female agency that is entirely detached from biological necessity. Similarly, in *He, She and It*, Piercy explores the ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Research papers by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) explore the character of Yod as a challenge to biological essentialism. Hayles argues that Piercy uses Yod to question "where the human ends and the machine begins" (163). Jenny Wolmark has noted how Piercy's Yod, serves as a mirror for human identity. "The cyborg Yod serves as a mirror in which the fractured and fragmented nature of human identity is revealed" (158). The scholarly consensus on Piercy's work represents a Global North perspective where technology is primarily a tool for identity construction, social reform, and the expansion of the Self.

But the works of Manjula Padmanabhan provide a necessary Techno-Critical intervention from the Global South. Her play *Harvest* has been widely analysed through the

lens of Postcolonial Studies. Critics like Shital Pravinchandra argue that *Harvest* exposes the transnational exchange of organs, where the bodies of the third-world poor are treated as a standing reserve for the first-world wealthy (151). Unlike the cyborgs of Piercy, Padmanabhan's characters are not merging with machines for liberation; they are being consumed by them. Scholarship on *Escape* focuses on the themes of gendercide and extreme surveillance. Critics have noted that Padmanabhan's Techno-Panopticon is much more fatal than Western versions because it is coupled with the total erasure of the female form.

Most existing scholarship remains segregated or polarized. Western scholars like Haraway and Hayles analysed Piercy, and postcolonial scholars like Mukherjee and Pravinchandra analysed Padmanabhan. There is a lack of comparative, transnational studies that place Piercy and Padmanabhan in a direct dialogue. Many studies on surveillance in literature still rely on external watching. There is a gap in analysing invasive/internalized surveillance— technology that lives inside the skin (chips, modules, genetic coding). This study will show how surveillance has moved from the street corner into the bloodstream and the womb. Older research defines agency as political protest or running away. There is a lack of theoretical application of bio-agency or glitch feminism to these specific texts. This study proposes a new kind of resistance. In a world of perfect AI and total surveillance, the human error— menstruation, aging, biological growth, and even death—becomes the only way to glitch the system. By comparing Piercy's utopian vision with Padmanabhan's dystopian views, this study highlights how surveillance technology acts as a double-edged sword: a tool for liberation in the West and a mechanism of control in India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the theoretical evolution from Techno-Utopianism to Techno-Criticism through the selected works of Marge Piercy and Manjula Padmanabhan.
2. To examine the conceptualization of the cyborg and cybernetic body.
3. To interrogate the mechanisms of Surveillance and the Techno-Panopticon.
4. To explore the tactics by which female agency is practiced in repressive high-tech environments.
5. To bridge the research gap through a comparative critique of Western and Indian cyberfeminism.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative-interpretative methodology based on in-depth textual analysis of the selected works is employed in the study, to investigate the themes of the body, surveillance and women agency in the chosen works of Marge Piercy and Manjula Padmanabhan.

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon a multi-layered approach that intersects cyberfeminism with Foucault's theories of Bio-politics and Surveillance. The cyberfeminist exploration begins with Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and ends with Legacy Russell's "Glitch Feminism". This exploration helps to analyse how female agency evolves from becoming a machine to breaking the machine. This framework allows for a nuanced exploration of the body and agency as they navigate the shift from utopian digital dreams to critical technological realities.

The following selected fictional works of Padmanabhan and Piercy serve as the primary sources of the study :

1. *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy
2. *He, She and It* (1991) by Marge Piercy
3. *Harvest* (1997) by Manjula Padmanabhan
4. *Escape* (2008) by Manjula Padmanabhan

To support the analysis of primary texts, the study extensively draws upon various secondary sources like theoretical books, peer-reviewed articles and critical essays on cyberfeminism theory and others. The study adopts a comparative-analytic approach. It analyses how the same technology, like reproductive tech, is seen as a liberator in one cultural context and as an oppressor in another.

Scope and Limitations

By focusing on the Techno-Utopian visions of the Global North and the Techno-Critical realities of the Global South, the study aims to examine the shifting paradigms of gender, technology and power in a digitally mediated world. The geographical and cultural scope is deliberately comparative, bridging the literary landscapes of the United States and India. This cross-cultural analysis is essential to understand how technological advancements does not affect all female subjects in a same way. Chronologically, the study covers a pivotal era in the development of technological and feminist theory, spanning from the mid-1970s to the early twenty-first century. This timeframe allows the research to trace the evolution of the digital dream. Thematically, the study mainly focuses on three major themes under cyberfeminism: The Body, Surveillance, and Female Agency. By limiting the thematic focus to these three areas, the research maintains a rigorous and deep analytical depth rather than a broad and superficial overview. The theoretical scope of the study is equally significant, as it

integrates Foucauldian Surveillance theory with cyberfeminism. The research applies the concept of the Panopticon to the digital era, creating a framework for the Techno-Panopticon. Finally, the scope of the study extends to its academic and social relevance. While the primary analysis is literary, the findings have broader implications for the fields of digital sociology and bio-ethics.

Despite the contributions, the study has some limitations also. A limitation of this study lies in its special focus on the limited number of works of two authors, which, although analytically deep, do not reflect the entire variety of feminist involvement with digital concerns. The research is confined to the three themes mainly: Body, Surveillance and Agency. Although the study adapts a translational lens, it primarily contrasts American and Indian perspectives and thus doesn't account for cyberfeminist narratives of other regions. Moreover, as digital technologies and online space are rapidly changing, certain details of digital surveillance and cyber violence as the subject of the study will keep changing after the temporal frame of the study. This research primarily focuses on cyberfeminist framework to provide deep insights into technology and gender, it may overlook other critical perspectives such as Psychoanalytic.

Tentative Chapter Scheme

The study is divided into five chapters, which are meant to build up the main argument of the research gradually and to provide clarity of concept, consistency of theme and analysis. The chapterisation is a sign of the shift in the theoretical background of the study towards an interpretative analysis of the selected texts.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Chapter one provides an overview of the relationship between gender and technology. This chapter serves to contextualize the historical and ideological transition from Techno-Utopianism to Techno-Criticism. It provides the definition of the major terms, including the digital body, surveillance, and female agency. It also gives an introduction of the selected authors and their works. It also defines the methodology and goals of the study. The theoretical framework is also explained in detail in this chapter, establishing the lens through which the primary texts will be analysed.

Chapter 2: The Techno-Utopian Paradigm: Body, Surveillance, and Agency in Marge Piercy

This chapter examines the Techno-Utopian phase of cyberfeminism, by analysing Marge Piercy's selected works. It interrogates how technology is conceptualized as a liberatory tool in the Global North, specifically through the lens of bodily autonomy, cognitive liberty and reproductive freedom. In novels like *Woman on the Edge of Time*, technology—such as artificial wombs—is analysed as a means to dismantle patriarchal control over the female body. In *He, She and It*, the research explores the creation of 'Yod' as a means to transcend biological binaries and redefine human-machine synergy. Surveillance is interrogated as a structural obstacle through which the characters negotiate using their networks. Finally, Agency is analysed as an enabling strategy through which female subjects can reconstruct themselves and their surroundings. By analyzing these three pillars together, this chapter establishes Piercy's work as a landmark of Techno-Utopianism, where technology is used to expand the boundaries of the self.

Chapter 3: The Techno-Critical Turn: Body, Surveillance, and Agency in Manjula Padmanabhan

Chapter three serves as a Techno-Critical intervention by shifting the focus on selected works of Manjula Padmanabhan. Unlike Piercy's optimism, this section investigates how technology is weaponized to monitor, commodify, and extract value from the marginalized body, as seen in the organ-trade dystopia of *Harvest*. This critique is further extended in *Escape*, where extreme surveillance and high-tech gendercide are analysed as tools of total biological control. Surveillance is re-imagined as an invasive, biological gaze—a Techno-Panopticon that monitors reproductive and physical survival rather than just social behaviour. Consequently, Agency is redefined as a reactive struggle for survival, where characters use the glitch as their primary mode of resistance. This chapter highlights the dark side of the digital divide arguing that, technology often functions as a high-tech extension of patriarchal exploitation in developing countries, rather than as a tool of liberation.

Chapter 4: Navigating the Digital Divide: A Comparative Critique of Piercy and Padmanabhan

This chapter is the most important as it brings the three pillars—Body, Surveillance, and Agency—into a direct transnational dialogue by comparing works of two authors. It investigates the digital divide by contrasting the liberatory potential of technology in the North with its exploitative reality in the South. This chapter compares the Western cyborg identity with the Postcolonial donor reality. By synthesizing these differences, the analysis explores how agency is exercised differently across geopolitical landscapes—transitioning from identity-based negotiation in Piercy's works to the primal, glitch-based resistance in Padmanabhan's dystopian visions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The final chapter outlines all the key findings of the research. It advocates for a transnational techno-critique. It summarizes the cyberfeminism move from Techno-Utopianism to Techno-Criticism. This chapter also underlines the contribution of the research and advances the feminist literary criticism. It also acknowledges the limitations of the current research and suggests future research directions.

Significance of the Study

The proposed research holds profound academic, social, and theoretical significance. Academically, it helps to navigate cyberfeminist themes in Padmanabhan's writing. Socioculturally, it addresses the urgent issues of digital surveillance and bodily autonomy in the age of technological advancement.

Much of the cyberfeminism theory has remained rooted in Western utopianism—the idea that technology is a blank slate for identity. This study is significant as it challenges this white-washed version of the cyborg. By analysing Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* and *Escape* alongside Marge Piercy's works, the study provides a subtle understanding of how the condition is experienced differently in the two divergent spaces.

Historically, Marge Piercy and Manjula Padmanabhan have been studied in isolation—Piercy within the tradition of Western speculative fiction and Padmanabhan within Postcolonial Indian drama. This study is of interest as it places these two authors together in a direct, sustained dialogue. It presents a transnational cyberfeminism and shows how the utopian dreams of Piercy, changed into the dystopian warnings in Padmanabhan's writings. This chronological mapping is essential for understanding the history of the genre.

The study's importance lies in its exploration of how surveillance is specifically weaponized against the female body. This serves as a warning to the modern society. The

research also shows how women use their biological functions as weapons in this technology-oriented world. The study shows that the physical body remains the ultimate glitch that surveillance systems cannot fully control. This is significant for modern feminist activism to suggest that resistance in the digital age is possible through reclamation of their physical and biological selves.

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